MMR_0219 Steven J. Morris

Steve Morris is shown in his shop with son Cory and grandson Emmitt. The team has a unique hobby — manufacturing almost to-scale, rideable trains. These "Morris Engines" can take six months or more to build, and they currently have enough orders to keep them busy for a couple of years.

Meet Steve, his son Cory and his grandson Emmitt. They share one remarkable and fantastic hobby driven by their passion. This is not the "train collecting" you may think you know and may have seen in someone's basement. No-no. This is the actual manufacturing of trains —- from raw materials.

These are trains you see in many amusement park-type settings. Morris' workshop is a mechanic/ fabricator's true delight. It's a place any skilled fabricator would love to work in, let alone own. Morris, now retired, has been making these large-scale, rideable model trains for over 45 years, with little to no local recognition or fanfare.

Morris and Cory cut out and fabricate train engine bodies and chassis — including the boxcars and caboose — on a scale large enough for adults to ride upon. The pulling locomotive with a tender car is about five feet long. There are also the optional five passenger cars.

Several of Morris' trains operate on a track at Cornwell's Turkeyville in Marshall. The track covers a few feet short of one mile. The longest track in this area, as far as Morris knows, has almost five miles of track.

Walking through the shop, trying to mentally grasp what takes place in the 30-foot by 40-foot building, would be challenging for many. The amount of equipment — including heavy metal forming fabricating presses; drills and welders of all types; and a foundry set-up — and the pieces and parts that go with it, is beyond many of us to mentally inventory.

You would have to be a tool and die maker, a press operator, a certified welder, a chemist, a metallurgist, an engineer, a designer and a metal fabricator just to begin to have all the expertise Morris and his son Cory possess.

To produce these remarkable trains to this level of exactness takes an enormous amount of patience, dedication and meticulous workmanship. It means many hours of determination in the shop. And all this does not take into consideration the business side of this endeavor; as all this is for a hobby.

In their shop, the two of them manufacture about 80 percent of the parts out of heavy steel plating and large amounts of aluminum for castings that are needed to make these trains.

The only main component they do not make is the gas engines. Morris' units, however, are adaptable to steam, diesel, electric or gas. Not that they couldn't build the engines, but it would just take up too much time.

Morris currently has orders that will keep him busy over the next couple of years. It normally takes about six months to produce an almost-to-scale locomotive engine car and following tender car, counting from the time the order is placed. Currently, there are a few orders for these "Morris Engines" heading to Oregon in various stages of completion.

All of this work comes to them by word of mouth; their craftsmanship is well known. There is no national organization for this type of work, although there are a few regional associations.

One of those local organizations is the Mid-Michigan Railroad Club, where you can find information on Morris and his well-known Morris Engines. An organization named Discover Live Steam seems to be the "go-to" source for information concerning the unique hobby.

Morris puts in a vigorous full-day's work; sometimes with assistance from his 9-year-old grandson, Emmitt. In addition, after putting in a more than a full day in the construction trades, Morris' son Cory is there every night, putting in an additional four to six hours. This is truly a father/ son/ son operation.

I suppose if Morris becomes complacent, he can always go back to his real "labor of love" — a six-foot-long, fully-functional, steam-driven locomotive that weighs in at just shy of 2,000 pounds. He and his father started it 35 years ago.

While walking around all the purposefully located equipment, machinery and partly assembled train engines, I did not see “retirement” written anywhere. Here, amid all the trains, the pieces and parts, you will find a proud heritage, a unique man, an exceptional family lineage and one heck of a hobby.